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ABSTRACT

Language interference (which was originally posited in ESL theory) involves ways in which language learners draw upon previous language experiences to fill holes in their knowledge of a second language they are learning. Since the 1970s, language interference has been a part of the pedagogy of basic writing, concerning itself with ways that basic writers' oral language can interfere in the learning of academic discourse. An extension of this premise, genre interference, or negative transfer, occurs when a writer tries to use properties from a known genre in an unknown one, but the properties do not match. To determine potential sources of genre interference, 34 students enrolled in a developmental composition class at Tarleton State University in Texas were surveyed about what genres they read most often outside of classroom work. Nine of the top 10 genres were journalistic (newspaper sports stories, news magazine articles, etc.). A follow-up survey indicated student confusion between the journalistic and academic genres, suggesting the journalistic genre as a source of interference with the academic. Greater pedagogical and theoretical attention should be given to genre interference stemming from the written discourses that students bring to basic writing courses. (Four figures are included; one appendix containing the survey questions, and a bibliography containing 14 references are attached.) (SG)

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Randall L. Popken

Some Sources of Written Genre Interference in the Work of Basic Writers

Introduction.

Language interference, as originally posited in ESL theory, involves ways in which language learners draw upon previous language experiences to fill holes in their knowledge of a second language they are learning (Weinreich, 1966). Since the 1970s, language interference has been a part of the scholarship and pedagogy of basic writing, concerning itself largely with ways that basic writers' oral language (specifically their home dialects) can interfere in their learning of academic discourse (Sloan, 1979; Farr Whiteman, 1981; Wilson, 1985). To this point, most of this language interference theory has focused on lower level linguistic forms: grammar, syntax, spelling.

However, in light of recent interest by text linguists and poststructuralist discourse theorists in forms beyond the sentence, it is now possible for us to consider interference more globally: ways that elements of whole previously experienced discourses might interfere with basic writers' attempts to acquire academic writing. While little scholarship has explored this area, nearly all has involved interference from oral discourses. For instance, Bizzell (1978) identifies how some of her basic writers often use an "honest face" ethos (characteristic of oral persuasive discourse) on their academic papers because they have not mastered means of persuasion more suitable in academic contexts. Similarly, Robinson (1983) argues that some basic writers' excessive use of coordinate

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conjunctives is an example of interference from oral conversation, in which and and but help speakers "hold the floor" and perpetuate their discourse (23-24). But both Bizzell and Robinson are talking about oral discourse interference. What about interference from basic writers' previous written discourses?

My interest in this paper is in just this kind of interference, something Eiler (1989) refers to as "genre interference" (48). At a state in their acquisition process--an "interlanguage" state (Selinker, 1977) in which they are in transition from one written discourse to another--basic writers often allow aspects of a previously written discourse to intrude on the one they are trying to acquire. This paper posits some principles of written genre interference, provides examples of the phenomenon at work in the texts of two basic writers, shows results of two studies of genre interference, and raises some pedagogical questions related to genre interference.

The Nature of Written Genre Interference.

Rhetorical genres are fundamental to ways that writers produce and acquire written language. All of written language is really "a collection of genres" (Faigley, 1985, 238), a vast array of which exist in our culture: resumes, editorials, short stories, feasibility reports, letters-to-the-editor, personal essays, advertisements, poetry, and so on. As Christie (1985) suggests, being able to control genres allows one to make meaning and also to become an active member of a discourse community. What "learning to write" really comes down to, then, is learning to control

genres--particularly the conventional features of those genres. These features, or "properties" as Todorov (1976, 162) calls them, may range from tangible aspects of form, such as syntax and word choice, to non-linguistic matters, such as topic selection and evidence type.

Genre interference occurs when a writer tries to use some of these properties from a known genre in an unknown one. This "transfer" strategy (Selinker, 1969) need not necessarily result in interference; it can succeed if properties of the known genre match those of the unknown, as shown in figure 1:

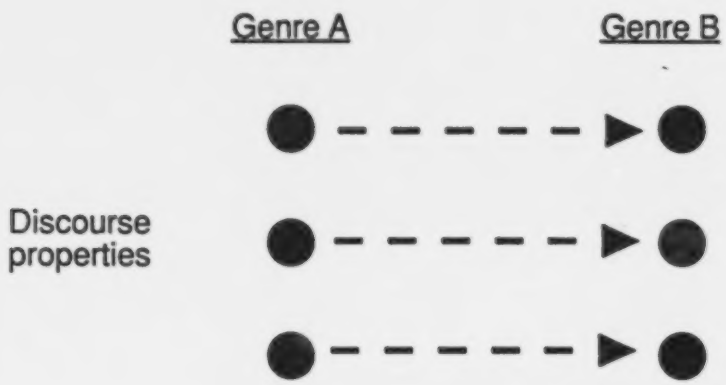

Figure 1. Positive Transfer

More often than not, however, the properties don't match, resulting in "negative transfer" (genre interference), as shown in figure 2:

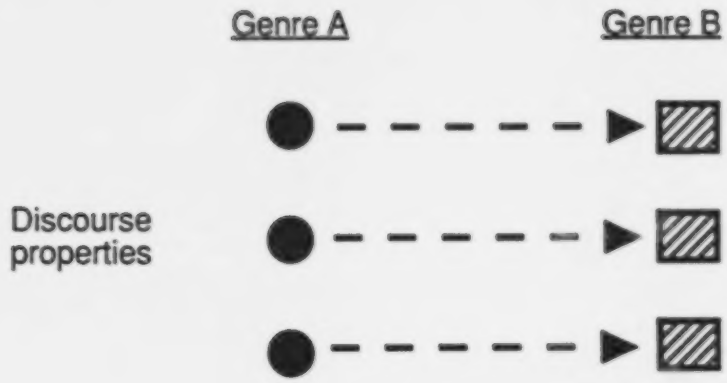

Figure 2. Negative Transfer ("Interference")

This negative transfer--this genre interference--is not necessarily just the result of what a student has previously written. It is possible that what a student has previously read might also result in interference. After all, as Farr and Daniels (1986) argue, when people read "they unconsciously internalize the patterns of written language they are encountering at many levels, including vocabulary, sentence varieties, ways of addressing the reader, strategies for achieving textual cohesion, patterns of organization, means of supporting or providing details, and other elements of written language" (60). In other words, writers may pick up genre properties from their reading, and that genre knowledge may later interfere with their acquisition of a new discourse.

To illustrate genre interference somewhat more concretely, let me draw examples from two writers whose work I cited in an earlier paper (Popken, 1989). The first student was in my first basic writing class in Texas; thus--wanting myself to know about

the state--I asked each student to produce a paper identifying a special locale in Texas, describing this place, and then explaining its significance. I envisioned papers containing some aspects of academic discourse (analysis, proof). What I hoped for and what I got, however, were very different with this student, who chose to write about Dallas:

> When visitors or tourists come to Dallas they mainly want to know a little history like where was President Kennedy killed. Where's the JFK Museum and monument. Right across from the assisanation point the Texas School Book Depository. Or where is Central Expressway, the hardest and most frustrating freeway to drive on or try to get to a place on. Or you might here "Hay Y'all," where's the Gallaria, and the most modern newest shopping malls ever built? With most of their shops coming from New York, Paris, etc. . . . Well, if you ever had a notion to come to the big city y'all come see us.

The boosterish word choice, the second-person point of view (after sentence three), the question-answer schema, and the "y'all come see us" slogan show that the writer has taken a number of properties from an entirely different genre--the tourist promotional brochure--and inserted them into his academic text. What probably happened was that he had no idea what I meant when I instructed the class on doing a "paper," but when he saw a somewhat familiar topic type, he knew of only one genre to contain it. I doubt that he had ever written such a brochure himself, but he probably had read many of them.

Something similar happened to the second basic writer. This student had been assigned to write an analysis of a film; in preparation for the task, the class had read an article in which the author argued that Vietnam War movies in the late 1980s attempted

to heal moral and psychological wounds from the War. I asked students to select a film on any topic they had recently seen and then to identify a cultural purpose they saw it serving. One student chose to analyze Top Gun; typical of his paper was the following paragraph:

> One other and possibly the most important factor in this movie is the casting. The pick couldn't have been better. From the ever so popular heart throb, Tom Cruise. To the truly sexy Kelly McGillis. Together they make magic on the screen. One of their magical moments was the powerful sex scene that lingered in the minds of the audience long after the closing credits. Of all the scenes in the movie, this one would have to be the most remembered.

This writer has not produce a paper. The cliches ("magic on the screen"; "lingered in the minds of the audience long after the closing credits") and the example-less development are both properties of another genre: the movie review. Although this student already controlled some properties of academic writing (after all, he had already written two fully-developed papers before this one), the movie review seems to have blocked out what he already knew about using examples. The movie review seems to have been such a powerful influence on him that he could only see this subject matter handled on the review's terms. In short, the review seems to take over the discourse.

Genre Interference: Two Exploratory Surveys.

The present paper attempts to explore genre interference further, specifically the most likely sources of genre interference for basic writers. To look for possible sources, twice during the 1990 spring semester at Tarleton State University, I surveyed

the 34 students enrolled in developmental composition classes.

1. Survey #1.

First, I surveyed the student on genres they read most often outside of classroom work. I provided the students with a list of 52 common genres, ranging from religious tracts (e.g., The Bible, The Book of Mormon) to "entertainment" magazine articles (e.g., Playboy, Playgirl), and I also allowed space for them to add ones of their own. The top ten genres, according to percentages of readers, are shown in figure 3:

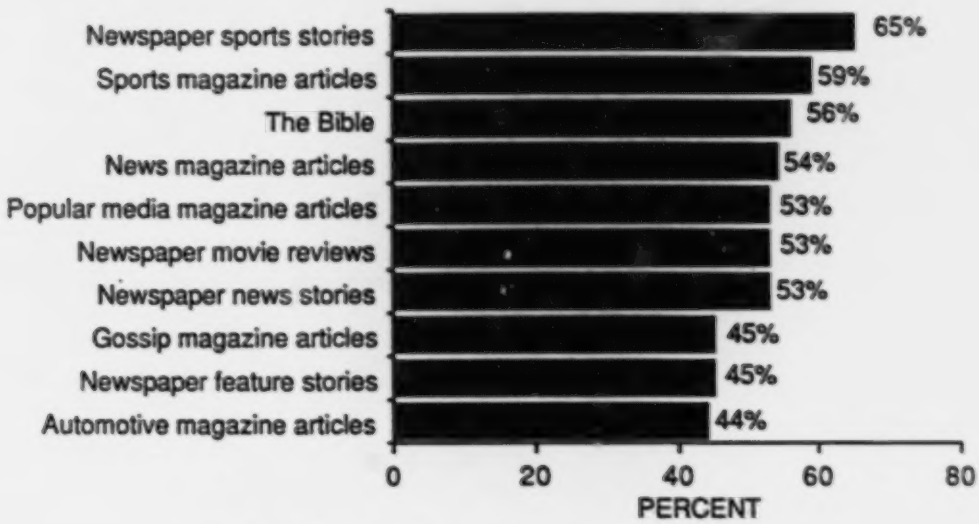

Figure 3. Genres Read by Basic Writers

What is most notable about his list is the similarity of genres: nine of the top ten genres listed were journalistic, ranging from sports magazine articles to automotive magazine articles. This finding in itself, of course, does not signify that journalistic genres will show up as interference in these writers' papers. However, if Farr and Daniels' claims about the impact

of reading are true, then--because of the sheer bulk of journalism that these 34 students are exposed to daily--there is an enormous potential for journalism to interfere.

2. Survey #2.

As a followup to this first survey, I set out to look for evidence of actual journalistic influences on these basic writers' perceptions of properties required in the genres they would have to write for college courses. Therefore, the second survey involved a hypothetical situation (see Appendix) in which the students were asked to assume that they had been assigned an analysis of the film Field of Dreams for a composition class. Then, they chose from pairs of options for how seven different aspects of the paper (e.g., introduction, conclusion, paragraph development) would best be handled on this paper; one option was written journalistically (from a movie review originally appearing in Sports Illustrated), the other academically (my rewrite of the Sports Illustrated review). These seven aspects represented areas of significant genre property differences between academic and journalistic writing. For instance, students were to choose what they saw as the best way to use quoted material for this paper--option 1 (quoted academically) or option 2 (done journalistically):

OPTION 1. Robinson has attempted to make a film in which soul-searching is the order of the day. He points out, for instance, that his "point all along was to show a speculative cast of characters who all want to look deeply at themselves" (327).

OPTION 2. Robinson has attempted to make a film in which

soul-searching is the order of the day.

> "My plan all along was to show a speculative cast of characters who all want to look deeply at themselves," Robinson said in a recent interview.

Results of this second survey and genre property areas are shown in figure 4:

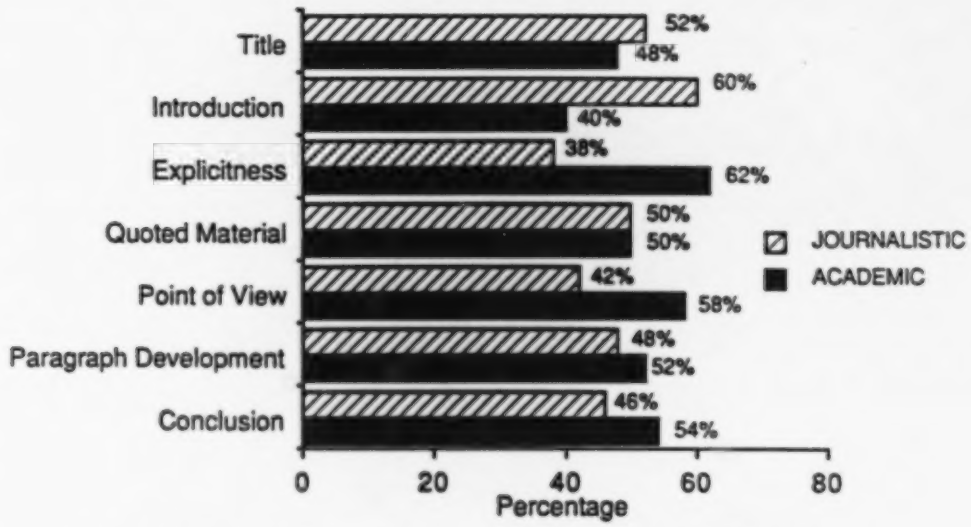

Figure 4. Discourse Properties Chosen by Basic Writers

In most of these areas, at least half of the students mistook journalistic genre properties for ones more appropriate for academic texts. Half of them, for instance, thought that option 2 (above) was the best way to use quoted material for an academic paper. Now, admittedly, these results do not mean that journalistic genres are certain to interfere in these students' actual writing; there is, after all, a big difference between how one perceives language and how one produces it. However, these writers' confusion over the two discourses does show that many of them had prior discourse experiences that created a kind of

screen through which they were being asked to acquire a new discourse. That is, it was not as if they had somehow segmented the discourse types in their acquisition process; instead, very clearly there was an overlapping. This overlapping, it seems to me, is at the heart of interference.

Pedagogical Conclusion.

This paper raises a good many more questions than it answers. Among them is how basic writing pedagogy might be related to genre interference. In the case of the two writers whose papers I referred to earlier, my assignments may actually have induced the interference. The first writer had to respond to a contextually contradictory assignment: the task asked him to write an academic genre on a decidedly non-academic subject. It is little wonder that interference occurred. In the case of the second student, I ought to have foreseen that the only prior experiences students like him had had with discourse about films was the movie review. In short, interference was almost inevitable.

In closing, I suggest that we give greater pedagogical and theoretical attention to genre interference--explorations into the written discourses that students bring to our basic writing classes.

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Appendix

Survey of Genre Properties

Directions.

Please assume that you are writing a paper for a college composition class on the movie Field of Dreams, a recent film about a man in Iowa who decides to build a baseball diamond in his cornfield. Assume that the class watched the film on videotape and that the instructor in your class has assigned you to "analyze the film" in this paper.

As you write this paper, you probably have (in your head) several options as to how certain parts of it might be written. Assume that two of these options in each case are the ones given below, "OPTION 1" and "OPTION 2." In each case, choose one option only (by circling it)--the option you think would be best for this particular paper assignment.

A. Which of the following would be better as a TITLE for such a paper:

OPTION 1. "Diamond in the Rough"

OPTION 2. "The Theme of Personal Search in Field of Dreams."

B. Which of the following would be better as an INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH to such a paper:

OPTION 1. In the late 1980s, a number of films have appeared which glorify baseball, showing it for its metaphysical, emotional, and even religious implications. One such film is Field of Dreams, written and directed by P.A. Robinson, who based his work on Shoeless Joe, a novel by W.P. Kinsella. The following paper will argue that the central theme of the film is personal search for meaning.

OPTION 2. A vision inspires Ray Kinsella (played by Kevin Costner) to cut a baseball diamond out of his Iowa cornfield, and a mysterious voice tells him, "If you build it, he will come." Maybe it was just such a voice that told film-maker P.A. Robinson to make a movie out of W.P. Kinsella's novel Shoeless Joe. The result is Field of Dreams, a film that is as wonderful and inviting as is Ray's baseball field.

C. Which of the following would be better as a BODY-PARAGRAPH EARLY in such a paper:

OPTION 1. Much of the early part of the film involves main character Ray Kinsella's obsession with building his field even though at first he doesn't actually know who he is building the field for. When his daughter runs into the house to tell him that "There's a man on your field," he discovers the "man" to be Shoeless Joe Jackson, the same Joe Jackson who had been banned from the game for life in 1921. In one of the move's best scenes, Joe and Ray check each other out, not with words but with gloves and batting practice. At the end of this scene, Shoeless Joe tells Ray "There are more of us," and soon all his teammates are also on the field.

OPTION 2. The obsession of main character Ray Kinsella with building a little ball park in his Iowa farm actually involves his own personal search, involving his own father. When he hears a voice telling him to build a ball park, Ray does so, even though he is not sure why. Later in the film, this search culminates in his discovery that it is actually his father who must come. This is the "he" who "will come" if Ray builds the field. As the film nears its end, Ray plays catch with his own father, who appears as a young man. This act of playing catch is a symbolic working out on Ray's part of his relationship with his father, whom he had rejected before his death. Thus, the film is really about Ray's self-searching.

D. Which of the following would be better as a way of USING QUOTED MATERIAL in such a paper:

OPTION 1. Robinson has attempted to make a film in which soul-searching is the order of the day. He points out, for instance, that his "point all along was to show a speculative cast of characters who all want to look deeply at themselves" (327).

OPTION 2. Robinson has attempted to make a film in which soul-searching is the order of the day.

"My plan all along was to show a speculative cast of characters who all want to look deeply at themselves," Robinson said in a recent interview.

E. Which of these two SENTENCES would be better in such a paper:

OPTION 1. If you watch Field of Dreams carefully, you might feel as if you are sharing in Kinsella's journey too.

OPTION 2. Watching Field of Dreams carefully often makes viewers feel as if they are sharing in Kinsella's journey.

F. Which of the following would be better as a BODY-PARAGRAPH LATER in the paper:

OPTION 1. Ray is not the only character searching for self in Field of Dreams. Dr. Moonlight Graham does as well. He had played in half an inning of major league baseball for the New York Giants in the 1930s, but had quit the game to become a doctor. Graham had been frustrated over the years, however, at what he had never done--he missed his opportunity to get to bat even one time in the big leagues. Thus, he too shows up in Ray's field, ready to rework his destiny, perhaps to find that self he had missed out on.

OPTION 2. Kevin Costner is superb as Ray. Right from the beginning he conveys a man with his feet on the ground but his head in the clouds. Almost every note of Costner's performance rings true, even though he dresses more like Ralph Lauren's idea of an Iowa farmer. As a supporting actress, Amy Madigan is excellent as Ray's feisty and loving wife, and so is Gaby Hoffman, who plays the role of their daughter. Ray Liotre is not as accomplished in his role as Shoeless Joe. The only real sore thumb in the movie is that at times it is too sentimental.

G. Which of the following would be better as a CONCLUSION in such a paper:

OPTION 1. People who thrive on adventure films will not like Field of Dreams. But those who are interested in a movie about a man who listens to his own inner voice will find Field of Dreams to be well worth the price of admission.

OPTION 2. Finally, it is clear that Field of Dreams is about a search for self, particularly in the ways that Ray and Dr. Brown work out their separate destinies. In this sense, the film far transcends other baseball movies such as Major League and Pride of the Yankees. It is more akin to sixties cult search-for-self classics such as The Graduate.